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# OBSERVER MEMORIES AND PHENOMENOLOGY

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## *abstract*

*This paper explores the challenge that the experience of third-person perspective recall (i.e. observer memories) presents to a phenomenological theory of memory. Specifically this paper outlines what Husserl describes as the necessary features of recollection, among which he includes the givenness of objects in the first person perspective. The paper notes that, on first sight, these necessary features cannot account for the experience of observer memories as described by Neisser & Nigro (1983). This paper proposes that observer memories do not so much entail a shift of perspective as they do a process of self-objectification and as such do not break with the phenomenological emphasis on the first person perspective.*

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## *keywords*

*Edmund Husserl, Ulric Neisser, Georgia Nigro, observer memories, episodic memory, perspective, self-objectification*

## 1. Introduction

The philosophical questions that we pose about consciousness today are inextricably linked to questions concerning perspective. Whatever is conscious is thought to experience the world from its own first-person perspective. Yet, is it reasonable to speak of conscious experiences from a third-person perspective? We speak often enough of adopting other perspectives but does such talk have any philosophic or scientific weight? Cognitive psychologists Ulric Neisser and Georgia Nigro famously investigated perspective in memory and made a distinction between observer memories and field memories (Nigro & Neisser 1983). Field memories are recollections from the first-person point of view. Thus, when we remember, we re-experience the event from the original perspective we had when we first witnessed it. According to Neisser and Nigro, there are also memories where we are spectators of ourselves. They call these observer memories and claim that they are recollections from the third-person perspective. The person recollecting sees his or herself from the outside, participating in some event or other. The authors describe the distinction between the two forms of memory as a difference of vantage point (*ibid.*, pp. 467-469).

This form of memory seems to pose a problem to philosophers who insist that the first-person perspective is a necessary feature of mental phenomena. Husserl is perhaps the thinker of the first-person perspective *par excellence* and we may wonder if new empirical findings upset Husserl's phenomenological account of memory, since he held there was apodictic evidence that the first-person perspective characterizes all conscious experience. Indeed, cognitive scientists have found that there are several factors that motivate a change of perspective in memory. Neisser and Nigro point to the purpose, emotional quality, and level of self-awareness of a memory determining whether it will have the field or observer perspective (*ibid.*, pp. 481-482). Other studies have shown that aging has an impact on the frequency of observer memories (Piolino et al. 2002) and there is some agreement that observer memories are re-constructions of past events rather than copies of them (on the 'construction' model of memory, see Conway & Pleydell-Pearce 2000). The aim of this paper is to investigate the challenges and opportunities that this form of recollection offers to Husserl's phenomenological analyses of memory and to decide whether

observer memories offer insuperable obstacles for intentional analysis.

## 2. What is a Phenomenology of Recollection?

Phenomenological research into recollection consists in the attempt to determine the intentional structure of the conscious experience of remembering, i.e. the way that the mind refers to or is 'about' transcendent objects when it remembers them. It also consists in determining the structures of remembered objects with respect to their thinkability, i.e. the conditions of their possible experience. When it comes to the analysis of intentional experiences, Husserl claims that what is directly revealed in reflection may not be enough and that a comparison within reflection is often necessary (Hua XIX/1, pp. 462)<sup>1</sup>. In his lectures on inner time-consciousness Husserl compares and contrasts recollection with perception. Perception and recollection have roughly the same temporal structure – they both have a privileged now-phase, they both have running-off phases. For example, whether I hear or remember a melody, the experience has a unity and flow in duration; the past notes do not completely disappear and the current note is fresh. In recollection there is a temporal present, a Now, but it is a remembered, re-presented Now that has elapsed. Thus, there is a discrepancy between the now *that* I recollect and the now *in which* I recollect, unlike perception where there is simultaneity between the perceived object and the perception's execution (Hua X, pp. 40–45).

To clarify this talk of discrepancy and simultaneity, we should note Husserl's distinction between intentional consciousness and inner consciousness. Intentional consciousness refers to acts that mean transcendent objects in different ways, e.g. perception, phantasy, signification. Inner consciousness is a pre-reflective self-experiencing – a self-awareness that the ego has of its own intentional activity. It is the non-explicit awareness that I own the copyright on the activities and sufferings of my consciousness. The traditional term is apperception. Through perception I experience external objects, but I also experience the act of perception immanently in inner consciousness. When perceiving some object it is given to me as being vividly now and the act of perception is also given to me apperceptively (pre-reflectively) as being now. Thus if I remember some object right now, I am running through an elapsed perception, and the object's now-phases have already run their course. Thus, there is a discrepancy between the object's now and the apperceptive now in recollection, but for perception they are simultaneous.

<sup>1</sup> All Husserl references are to the volumes of the *Husserliana* editions followed by the page number.

This discrepancy results from the doubleness of recollection. According to Husserl's analyses, recollection exhibits a double intentionality (Hua X, pp. 53-55, 57-59). Yet the doubleness of the intentionality does not yield a double-object. When I recollect, I thematically intend the object of my former perception and I implicitly intend that perception, which was originally experienced in inner consciousness. The external experience is necessarily nested in consciousness by means of an internal experience. The quality of 'having been perceived' is an essential determination of the recollected appearance. Thus Husserl says that recollection is constituted by a double intentionality. The act of perception is intentionally *implied* but not thematically posited in recollection, unlike the remembered object. For example: 'I remember my snow-shovel' does not mean 'I remember having perceived my snow-shovel' as that would signify an act of reflection. It rather means 'I see the snow-shovel as having been'. In the now the rememberer sees the not-now. Expressed more technically, I intend the same object, I execute that perception again, and this 'again' expresses how retentions have modified that intentional act. Here retention refers to a phase of the living present that both preserves and *de*-presents phases of my intentional acts as they trail off into the past.

Since recollection has a double intentionality, and intentionality is structured by inner time-consciousness, recollection also has a double flow; I experience both the initial perception's elapsed now and recollection's actual now. Despite this doubleness, it belongs to *one* stream of consciousness. Conscious acts like perception endure in inner consciousness but they also succeed each other and remembered-perceptual acts appear as having a certain co-ordination in that succession. Husserl holds that recollection is an experience integrated into one conscious life by virtue of its determinate horizon of protentions (Hua X, pp. 52-53).

Just as intentional acts have their retentions, so they have their protentions, which refer to the phase of the living present that is open to what is coming next. Whereas the protentions of perception emptily and indeterminately anticipate what is coming, the protentions of memory have been determined. The moments that I protend in one phase of memory are identical with the moments I retend in a subsequent phase of memory, which does not hold for perception. More plainly: the next moment of perception is a possibility while the next moment of recollection is an actuality, a determinate part of my unitary, flowing conscious life. Thus, remembered events are posited in a temporal context. In remembering an object, I implicitly intend the perception with its obscure temporal

surroundings, which are nothing other than the moments of my life.

To sum up this sketch of the phenomenology of recollection we can say that: perception gives me the 'now as now' by virtue of the simultaneity of its object, the object's presentation, and the inner awareness of that presentation. To reproduce an elapsed now I must bring about a modified perception, which is what we call recollection. The thematic focus of this recollection is the perceived but we also implicitly intend the perceiving. In recollection I attend to the former perception's object and the object's now, which is posited *in relation* to the actually present now<sup>2</sup>.

3.  
What Challenge  
do Observer  
Memories  
Present to  
Phenomenology?

Can phenomenologists make sense of observer memories? It seems that the phenomenologist would hold that recollections must in principle be field memories. If recollection is re-experiencing what we originally perceived and if perception is necessarily in the first-person perspective, then it should follow that recollections are in the first-person perspective. Husserl's analyses show that the body bears the zero point of orientation for perceptual exploration. The horizon of perceptual space opens up around me. If I move my head then there is a shift of the object – the object stays where it is, but it now appears more to the left in my visual field. I apperceive my own possibilities of movement and the profiles of the objects around me as being correlated. Given the decisive role that the apperception of the body as a zero point plays in Husserl's analyses of perception, and given that recollection for Husserl is a quasi-re-perceiving, we must ask: what is the zero point of observer memories? What sort of perspective organizes appearances in observer memories?

The phenomenologist could deny that they are really recollections. Instead one might say that observer memories are knowledge of the past rather than recollections. This would then dismiss observer memories as being merely event-specific knowledge accompanied by confused quasi-perceptual elements. The strategy is not a satisfying one, given that observer memories appear as a species of episodic remembering rather than semantic knowing (on this distinction see Tulving 1972).

Perhaps observer memories have a distorted self-intention. Brough argues that Husserl's own logic dictates that recollection requires a triple, not double intentionality. When recollecting we intend: i) the object originally

2 The foregoing outline is quite meagre. It only presents what is necessary for the subsequent analyses, leaving out the important analyses of affection, motivation, and fulfilment in memory.

perceived in the act; ii) the perceptual act executed; and he adds iii) a past segment of the absolute time-constituting consciousness. To illustrate: I recall an object and to do so I implicitly intend the perception that constituted the object and to do that I even more implicitly intend the inner temporal experience that constituted the perception. Brough says: “to recall the elapsed act without representing the flow through which I first experienced it, would be tantamount to recalling an act which belonged to no one” (Brough 1975, pp. 60)<sup>3</sup>. We might have grounds to say that observer memories are recollections in which one intends an object and a perception but fails to properly couch those intentionalities in an intention of the flow that constitutes the synthetic unity of the stream of consciousness. We can then say that observer memories are conditioned by a distortion of recollection’s nested structure. The theme of self-consciousness is crucial but I would stress that observer memories do not have a failed self-intention but rather an original and peculiar form of self-intention. I propose that observer memories are genuine forms of recollection that involve a self-objectification.

#### 4. What is Self-objectification?

This theme is a vast and multifarious one. I will omit Husserl’s considerations concerning the empirical ego as a psycho-physical reality. Instead, I will restrict myself exclusively to forms of self-objectification that speak directly to the question of perspective. I will start with a straightforward case of self-objectification in perception, moving on to inner consciousness, then, taking these together, I will attempt a sketch of self-objectification in observer memories.

Already in perception we grasp ourselves as objects. Specifically in touch there occurs a twofold apprehension: I feel the *object’s* tactile features and I feel the localization of *my* sensations and movements (Hua IV, pp. 79–84). I touch the object, but I am also touched by the object, i.e. by touching objects I can discover objective features of my hand. Even in perception my body is constituted for me both as a means and as a transcendent object of external intuition. With respect to movement, I apprehend myself as initiating certain movements and as suffering other movements. Husserl’s famous distinction between *Leib* and *Körper* shows how my body is constituted for

3 This is a presentation and not an endorsement of Brough’s position. An alternative view can be found in Zahavi (2003), who posits that the pre-reflective self-awareness of the act is nothing other than its temporalizing. There are great merits to this latter position but the issue of whether or not inner consciousness is adequately described in analyses of time-consciousness is thorny. Brentano (2008, pp. 144–152) for one held that the apprehension of one’s intentional activity included propositional and even affective dimensions.

my consciousness as both a lived body and some extended matter (Hua IV, pp. 157-160). Here self-objectification means apprehending oneself as a thing with its exposed surfaces and its externality to intentional animation.

This awareness of one's body as something object-like, however, is not sufficient to explain the sort of self-objectification in observer memories. This tactile manner of self-objectification is a feature of perception and would as such be common to field memories insofar as they are re-perceivings. The self-object in observer memories is unlike this basic tactile self-objectification in two regards. First, in observer memories I take a distance from that which I apprehend as my body, whereas in touch I merely change attitude or apprehension with respect to my body. Second, in observer memories I apprehend my objectified self not just as a body, but rather as a person who I once was. Observer memories are not limited to merely remembering objective and causal features of my self. The self-objectification specific to observer memories requires further analysis.

Returning to our theme of inner-consciousness, we note that in recollection, the initial perception and its object have been representationally modified, but what of the inner consciousness involved? Husserl tells us that every experience is either impressional (i.e. inwardly presentational) or re-presentational. On the one hand, Husserl says that to every consciousness of something immanent (every impressional, inner consciousness) there corresponds a re-presentational consciousness of the same (to every sensed red there is a possible phantasmal red). On the other hand, every re-presenting is, in turn, couched in an impressional, inner consciousness; every conscious act is impressionally experienced. On the other, other hand (!), among such impressional experiences some are present as re-presentations. We must juggle three demands: 1) all consciousness involves inner, impressional consciousness; 2) any consciousness has a possible, representifying modification that corresponds to it; and 3) impression and representation are mutually exclusive terms (Hua XXIII, pp. 301-312). To clarify the stakes and theme, I find that in phantasy, for instance, I represent some event that is not really an event in my life. The phantasied event does not happen to me – it happens to a phantasied me. It is not a lived, impressional me but a modified me. I experience the act of phantasy and so it has a place in my stream of consciousness but it is present there as a foreigner. This is in stark contrast to perception, in which I fully identify with the one perceiving, where my experience of the perception is impressional through and through. It is doubtful that Husserl was ever

fully satisfied with the analysis of inner consciousness in recollection. Upon recollecting, consciousness folds back upon itself, yielding an experience that is temporally structured not by one centre but by two poles (two 'nows'). This doubleness both defines and obscures my self-experience in remembering – a dual nature that is difficult to clarify. On this background, what can say about self-awareness in observer memories?

If we really attend to observer memories, what proves to be truly salient in them is not the shift of perspective noted by Neisser and Nigro, but rather something that they missed: the introduction of a new element, the inclusion of an objectified self. The event I present in an observer memory belongs to my past, but it could not have happened like that. There is a self-object in the memory, one that I identify with, but there are certain irresolvable discrepancies. For example: if I remember shovelling snow from an observer perspective it is possible that I see the surface of my eyes. Yet, I could not have seen the surface of my eyes when I was outdoors in the snow.

Furthermore, it is misleading to say that one adopts a third-person perspective when having an observer memory. When I recollect myself shovelling, I recollect this self in front of me, at a certain distance and angle. Thus even my objectified self correlates to a zero point of orientation. The way that Husserl conceives of the connection between perspective and the body is not at all straightforward. For Husserl, even when I imagine a jabberwock it is given with an orientation to me – it is to the left of me, it is galumphing away from me. Thus my experience of the imagined jabberwock with its profiles is also correlated to my perspective although in this case we cannot speak of real, localized eyes that are really seeing (Hua IV, pp. 55-58). Therefore, observer memories cannot be characterized in terms of a shift of perspective but rather the constitution of a self-object that results in a complex awareness of perspectives. It is complex because not only is this self-object given to me in some form of memorial first-person perspective, I grasp this self-object precisely as something that has its own zero point of orientation. I apprehend my objectified self as having a certain perspective on the shovel.

There is no shift outside of the first-person perspective then. Our conceptual analysis based on intentionality finds that the common description of empirical-psychological research on observer memories errs where it says that observer memories are given in the third-person perspective. There is, however, a complex perspective due to the constitution of a self-object. With



respect to self-awareness or apperception in an observer memory we can say that it is: A) impressional because I experience it as really belonging to my past; B) representational because there are elements that I never really experienced; and most intriguing C) it is exteriorized<sup>4</sup>. The hard problem of self-awareness in observer memories is how to think the unity of the apperception of the remembering with its exteriorized self-awareness. In all recollection as such we implicitly present a lapsed self, who is removed from who we are now. The objectified self in an observer memory seems to give intuitive content to this sense of removal. The object-self in an observer memory is connected but not contiguous with my self now. It is me 'out there'. An observer memory objectifies the self-alienation conditioned by changes over time.

I will close this section with a few hypotheses concerning the benefits of observer memories, guided by the question: what does the self-object contribute to my conscious life? Aside from lacking certain lived, first-person attributes, can we not say that such a self-representation accomplishes something that the field-memory does not? It might be the case that the objectified-self acts as a stand-in, an actor who plays me on the stage of my past. This actor can explore and experience things while I safely watch from my seat. I can represent events at a distance without being affected by them in the same way that reliving them would entail. From a clinical, pathological perspective, this self-object might be akin to Deleuze & Guattari's (1991, pp. 60-81) *personnage conceptuelle*. Just as Zarathustra can tell me things that Nietzsche cannot, just as the transcendental ego can experience things that Kant cannot, so my self-object can relive disturbing experiences I cannot. Indeed, empirical research has shown that voluntarily changing recollections from field memories to observer memories decreases levels of affectivity (Robinson & Swanson 1993). It is precisely the benefit behind self-objectification that is difficult to explain in transcendental phenomenology. Why should I be psychologically vulnerable to my own past? Why should the transcendental ego feel any danger coming from its previous constitutional achievements? At any rate, there are also non-pathological explanations of self-objectification. There is likely a link

4 To admit both propositions A and B is tantamount to contradiction for Husserl. This points to the need for a revision of the old distinctions within inner consciousness. The main task of this revision would be to avoid conceptual contradictions while respecting the tension that defines the experience of recollection, i.e. the tension between memory's dreamlike nature and the way it presents events as 'hard facts' that have irrevocably and irreversibly passed. Perhaps the problem lies in Husserl's overly centrist conception of inner consciousness, which cannot handle heterogeneity. The path towards a reconciliation, then, lies in the direction of a more complex model that accounts for the way that, in remembering, consciousness doubles back on itself.

to what cognitive psychologists call ‘verbal overshadowing’. When one recounts an experience again and again, the narrative elements of the story may start to seep into the recollection. There would be a story-self in the recollection of the original event – a strange mixture of the ‘I’ that a story-character utters and the lived ‘I’. This calls for further empirical research.

5. **Conclusion** I will restate my initial question: do observer memories pose a problem for Husserl’s phenomenological account of recollection? I have argued that observer memories do not break or even escape Husserl’s account of recollection (i.e. they are not a salient counter-example). I hope also to have shown that Husserl has provided us with the distinctions and concepts to produce knowledge about observer memories in phenomenological description. Thus, rather than a proof against Husserl’s philosophy of recollection, I believe the observer memory phenomenon makes a strong case *for* Husserl’s foundational insight that self-identity and pre-reflective self-consciousness are vital structuring elements of mnemonic experience. What the observer memory does reveal, however, is that self-consciousness is ubiquitous yet evasive, moving on a spectrum from immediate, immanent self-identification to quasi-exterior-representation.

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